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Major and Minor

Question: How do you tell the difference between C major and A minor and other equivalent major/minor keys? When doing 5ths from C or A how do you know where the sharps and flats come in other than as written in the "Just the Facts" books?

Answer: The big difference between C major and A minor is that the "Tonic" - the home note, so to speak, is C when in C major and A when in A minor. And that implies different harmony, too. Suppose that you see a melody that has no sharps or flats anywhere: no key signature, no "accidentals" placed in the music ("accidentals" are sharps or flats that are not in the key signature). But you can see that the melody ends on A. It's undoubtedly in A minor. Look more closely and you'll see that the chords outlined or otherwise implied will tend to follow progressions of chords where the chord roots relate to A. The most common chords in most music are those built on the tonic (the "I" chord), those built on V (fifth note of the scale), IV, and II. So in A, you'd see a lot of chords built on A and E and D. But in C major the important roots would be C, G, F, and D, especially C and G.

If accidentals do appear in A minor, the likely ones will be G \sharp and possibly F \sharp . The G \sharp will be there because the composer will usually want to use a major "V" chord - the chord built on E, the 5th note of the scale - and that requires the G be sharpened. If the melody rises by scale note to that G \sharp the F might get sharpened too, because that makes a major second instead of the more exotic augmented second F-G \sharp . But notes raised for this purpose are not included in the key signature and that's why they need to be written in as accidentals - they're optional.

Implied harmony, in Roman numerals:

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The staff is divided into two sections. The first section, labeled "(C major melody)", contains a melody of notes C4, E4, G4, F4, E4, C4. Above the notes are Roman numerals: I above C, V above E, I above G, and I above C. The second section, labeled "(A minor melody)", contains a melody of notes A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, A4. Above the notes are Roman numerals: i above A, V above E, and i above A.

So, to generalize:

(1) First check the key signature, which will narrow the choice to two keys: a major key and its relative minor: C Major and A minor, or D Major and B minor, etc. ***The relative minor is the key three scale steps downward from the tonic of the major key.***

(2) Then check the final notes and identify the root of the final chord, or the final note of the melody. It will typically be the Tonic: C if in C major, A if in A minor, D if in D major, etc.

(3) When you are more used to looking things over at a glance, notice the harmony. If the piece is

polyphonic the chords will be apparent. If it's just a melody they will often be outlined or otherwise implied (there's a section in Exploring Theory with Practica Musica that discusses how to identify implied harmonies). The harmony is really the clincher: tonal music will frequently use the V-I or V-i cadence, which tells you which note is "I," the tonic.

As for the second part of the question: I think you're asking how can you tell the number of sharps or flats expected for a particular key -? Start with C, which has no sharps or flats. For every fifth you move upward, a sharp is added to the key signature for that tonic: C, G, D, A, E, B, F \sharp , C \sharp have 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 sharps in their key signatures. For every fifth you move downward you add instead one flat to the signature: C, F, B \flat , E \flat , A \flat , D \flat , G \flat , C \flat have 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 flats. And each major key has a relative minor that uses the same signature but whose tonic is three scale steps downward: for example, A minor, E minor, B minor, F \sharp minor have 0, 1, 2, and then 3 sharps. You don't really need to refer to a "circle of fifths" or a fact book; just count the fifths up or down from C for major scales; count fifths up or down from A for minor scales.